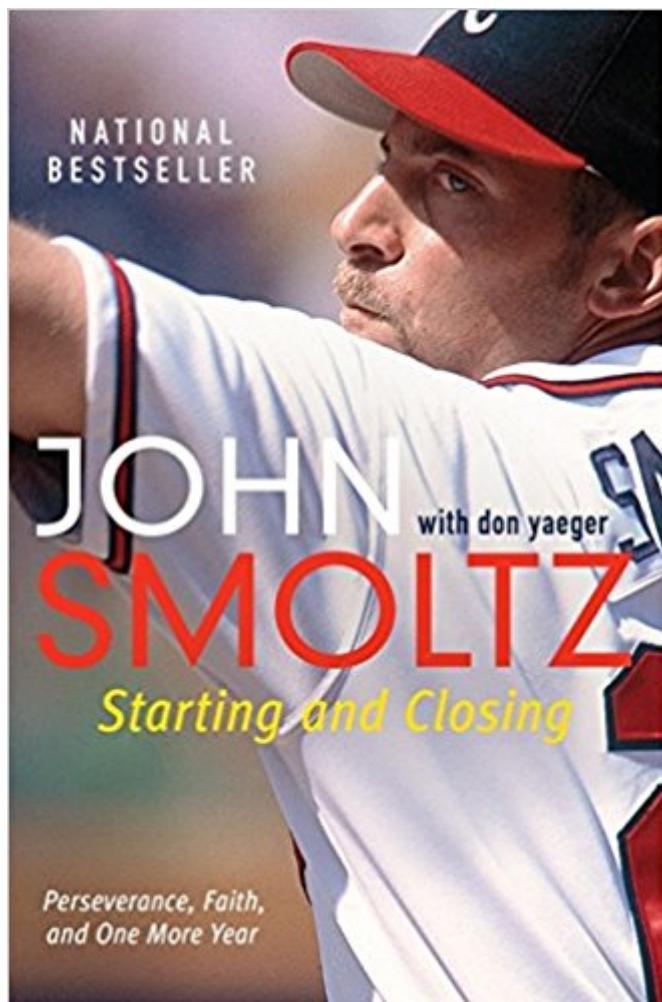


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Starting And Closing: Perseverance, Faith, And One More Year



Synopsis

John Smoltz was one of the greatest Major League pitchers of the late twentieth / early twenty-first century— one of only two in baseball history ever to achieve twenty wins and fifty saves in single seasons—and now he shares the candid, no-holds-barred story of his life, his career, and the game he loves in *Starting and Closing*. A Cy Young Award-winner, future Baseball Hall of Famer, and currently a broadcaster for his former team, the Atlanta Braves, Smoltz delivers a powerful memoir with the kind of fascinating insight into game that made *Moneyball* a runaway bestseller, plus a heartfelt and truly inspiring faith and religious conviction, similar to what illuminates each page of Tim Tebow’s smash hit memoir, *Through My Eyes*.

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Customer Reviews

“When Smoltz talks about baseball, the book comes alive . . . it all has the ring of authenticity and wisdom.” (Kirkus Reviews)

As a seven-year-old kid pitching a ball against a brick wall, John Smoltz decided to be a professional baseball player when he grew up. And from that simple decision until his last season on the mound in the major leagues, it was his faith, work ethic, and love for the game that propelled him through challenges that would have ruined other athletes. *Starting and Closing* chronicles the final season in a legendary career that included fourteen years in one of the most dominant rotations in baseball, a Cy Young Award, and a World Series title—all while battling and overcoming “career-ending” injuries. Recounting a season that tested his perseverance and

deepened his faith, Smoltz flashes back to watershed moments in the skeptic-defying journey from being one of the best starting pitchers of all time, to closer, to starter again. What emerges is an inspirational story from a man who believed not just in himself but in God's plan for him—“and one more year.”

I liked this book and give it 5-stars, but my rating is not an unqualified, enthusiastic, resounding endorsement, but a carefully considered reaction that swung back and forth between positive and negative that eventually evolved into a thoughtful understanding that I now value highly. Allow me to explain. John Smoltz was recently a first-ballot electee into the Baseball Hall of Fame, and I have observed him as an insightful guest analyst on MLB Network. He is also one of the heroes of one of major league baseball's "greatest games", Game 7 of the 1991 World Series in which he was on the losing end of a pitching duel with Jack Morris of the Minnesota Twins who eventually won in the 10th with a score of 1-0. As an avid MSBL (men's senior baseball league) pitcher myself, John Smoltz is a hero of mine. This is the mindset with which I began reading the book. To fully appreciate the book, you have to get past the first-person writing style that is more reminiscent of a personal diary or blog than a book. The first two dozen pages describe why Smoltz wrote the book in the first place. He was hesitant to do so because he was afraid that what he wrote would sound too self-absorbed. But he eventually convinced himself that it was important to share the experience in case there was somebody out there who was going through similar trials and tribulations. The remainder of the book chronologically covers the events from his shoulder surgery in June 2008 through his final season in 2009 including his retirement after that season and his pursuits following his retirement. Within the context of those two years, Smoltz reflects back upon significant events earlier in his life that relate to the present moment being described. Over the course of the book, you end up reading his entire biography. I had dramatically different reactions as I read the book. During the first third of the book, I felt like this was the most inspiring sports book that I had ever read. I was ready to pen a gushing review right then and there. But I restrained myself and kept on reading. However, when I reached the part (in the second third of the book) where he described taking up golf and becoming a born-again Christian, I became completely disenchanted with and nearly disinterested in the story. Now you have to understand that I love golf (watching for now, shortly to begin playing) and that I consider myself a Christian, but this section of the book seemed to describe a more self-absorbed bordering on selfish side of Smoltz with possibly misguided priorities. In addition, I felt that his accomplishments outside of baseball in starting a new Christian high school and sitting on its board for over a decade tapped financial resources, leveraged

contacts, and entailed more time than is normally available to the typical working man, and I could therefore not identify with it. The last part of the book drew me back into Smoltz's story in that it took all of his faculties to rebound from a disastrous first half of the 2009 season with the Boston Red Sox into a more satisfying and successful second half with the St. Louis Cardinals. This all after being cut loose from the Atlanta Braves following the 2008 season after a hall of fame career with them. What particularly drew me back was Smoltz's honesty in facing his shortcomings and overcoming obstacles to achieve at least a small amount of success with which to end his career (his one more season) when he could have easily retired after 2008. I also get goosebumps thinking about the parallel that can be drawn between the Cardinals giving Smoltz one last chance halfway through the 2009 season and Branch Rickey of the Cardinals giving Hall of Fame pitcher Grover Cleveland Alexander one last chance halfway through the 1926 season after the Chicago Cubs had cut him. Alexander pitched to two wins in the 1926 World Series, and was brought into the game in relief in the 7th inning to get the starting pitcher out of a jam pitching three scoreless innings and preserving the 3-2 lead sealing the Cardinals victory and World Series title. (Shades of San Francisco Giants' Madison Bumgarner in Game 7 of the 2014 World Series.) Finally, Smoltz shares his thoughts on why he thinks the Atlanta Braves were able to maintain a stranglehold on the National League East pennant for 14 straight seasons, but win the World Series only once during that time. I highly recommend the book, but be prepared for mixed feelings as you read it.

More than twenty years ago when I was in Catholic High School there was an older Brother who would frequently tell us that if we never made the same mistake twice we would be exceptional individuals. I remembered his words as I recently read hall of fame pitcher John Smoltz memoir. Does Smoltz admit to making mistakes on and off the field yes. Is he perfect of course not, no one is we are all imperfect, but his memoir is the best description by an athlete of learning from mistakes. And growing from them. Smoltz emphasizes learning from mistakes and perseverance in the face of obstacles. Secondly, Smoltz attacks a second subject through out his book. He describes how his belief in Jesus Christ gave him the heart and desire to pursue and accomplish all that he has accomplished in his life on and off the field. Smoltz does not brow beat the reader with his belief in Jesus. Smoltz emphasizes to the reader that the most important thing they can do in their lives is find God. Smoltz took a lot of courage to write so openly about such a deeply personal topic such as religion. He could have played it safe and just written a purely baseball book recounting his achievements on the diamond. Smoltz is a sports celebrity with a lot of courage.

I was not sure what kind of book this would be, but as a Braves fan since 1966, I had to read it. I saw Smoltz pitch a game against the Cubs in May of 1991 which was at a time of the season before the miracles started to come to past. I distinctly remember how determined he was with every pitch in what I figured was just another game that, like most Braves games in years past, would not have much significant bearing on the overall big picture of the National League final standings. Little did I know that the Braves would soon impress so many, for so long, in so many wonderful ways. Smoltz was right in the center of the whole movement, and was a key performer in during the entire Atlanta domination of post season National league play for fourteen years! Years later, in 2012 - the Braves were in a one game playoff with the Cardinals that was a new development for the National league that year. Again, I distinctly remember how I wished that we still had Smoltz to pitch that one game. Glavine, Maddux, Avery, Neagle, Millwood, Pete Smith, John Burkett, and all the other good pitchers often would get us to the post season, but when we got to that key game, when all the cards were on the table; it was the power pitching of John Smoltz, his intensity, that I wanted to take to the wire. The kind of teams that make the playoffs often have great hitters that figure out most any pitcher's hittable pitches quickly, but when the fastballs of a power guy are pounding in at the high 90 velocity, even the all-star batters struggle to get around on them. Even the big steroid guys had trouble trying to hit off of Smoltz for years, and years! BUT, about this book, ..I liked it because of the subject matter, and because of the author's perspective. Smoltz made many really good, insightful points about the players, management, and wrote many things from the perspective of the guy standing on the mound in the middle of a World Series game that I did not know. Really interesting points like "One inning of pitching a playoff game takes as much out of you as three innings of a regular season game," or "Guys that play in October actually have one less month of downtime to physically recover during the off season as the players of the teams that failed to make the playoffs." I never thought about that! This book reveals the real Smoltz, and to much lesser points, it reveals some of the other guys that he was around during those great years. The text is carefully edited, proof-read, and just "flows" well while keeping the reader interested. He mentions players like Rick Mahler who was an endeared favorite of Braves fans in the late 80's. I never knew Mahler was very interested in golf, and helped John learn the ways of that game. This book is very much a book of encouragement, and very pleasant to read without any disparaging remarks about other guys in the clubhouse, or off the field. It is truthful from what I can tell, and is pretty much what I hoped to read about the boys from those years. I am glad he wrote the book, and glad I read the book, ...but if I had my way; he would be back on the mound the next time we have to face the Kershaws of today. I miss that power!

Smoltz writes this intending it to be something of a self help book, but it does pretty much cover his whole career and has a number of anecdotes from his playing career. It's interesting in that he spends a lot of time on his final season when he came back from shoulder surgery with Boston and then St. Louis. But because of this he doesn't spend as much time on some of the bigger moments of his career like 1991 WS Game 7 and the 1995 or 1996 series. They're there - just not in a lot of detail. I'd give it 3.5 stars if let me.

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